What are we celebrating on Rosh Hashanah? Is it the creation of the world or the creation of humanity? Rabbi Yehoshua teaches that the world itself was created in Nisan! So on this day, we celebrate the creation of our world, our relationships and our actions. Our humanness and the imperfection that comes with it. In this parasha, Genesis 21:1-34, Sarah has just given birth to Yitzhak, a miracle in their lives because she never believed she would bear children. She saw Yishmael playing with baby Yitzhak and she became upset. It is unclear from the text why exactly she became upset, some infer from the language that perhaps Yishmael was doing something inappropriate with his younger brother. I think Sarah saw something else. Yishmael was about 16 when Yitzhak was born. I imagine he was a tall teenager and probably really starting to look like Avraham, but also like Hagar. He was clearly a man, clearly the heir to Avraham’s legacy And in that moment, I believe Sarah’s fears were being realized.

Back in Genesis 16, Sarai, not yet having been named Sarah, gave Hagar to Avram to conceive an heir. I repeat, she gave Hagar to Avram to make children. This notion should give a conscientious and critical reader pause. In her essay 1 entitled, “Sarah and Hagar” (1996), biblical scholar Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, z”l, points out that “Neither Sarah nor Avraham nor the ancient texts obtain the slaves’ consent: Using another person’s body as a surrogate for one’s own is part of the fabric of slavery. The womb, like the muscles, could be utilized for the good of the master. So Sarah proposed to be “built up” through the action of Hagar’s womb.” When Hagar conceived, the text says, מִנָּהּ בְּעֵינֵיהָ, that Sarai was lowered in esteem in the eyes of Hagar (16:4) and these same words get repeated to Avraham. But, the Hebrew text, without using names, gives us a glimpse of what is going on for Sarah. מִנָּהּ בְּעֵינֵיהָ can also be translated as “her mistress was lowered in her own eyes.” This is such a human thing to do! We feel a certain way and we project our feelings onto someone else as their feelings about us. Then, because Sarai perceived a threat, she abused Hagar. We’ve seen this before in the incident with the spies in Numbers 13:33, “We were like grasshoppers in their eyes!” They perceived their own insecurity instead of trusting in what God had already told them. And here too, Sarah is perceiving a threat to God’s promise, that she will bear an

heir for Avraham. In Yishmael she can Hagar and the death of the promise. And so, Hagar and her kid must go!

This hurts my heart, but I understand the humanness of it. Hagar probably felt that finally she would be raised in esteem, but Sarai, instead of seeing Hagar as an equal, felt that if Hagar were raised, that must necessarily mean that she is being lowered. I see this same dynamic playing out in the racial disparities in America right now. Because, like Sarah and Hagar’s relationship, our country and our relationships are also built on slavery. In America, slavery was the plan. The white people would be “built up” through the actions of the enslaved people. But the personhood of African heritage people got in the way of those plans, like the personhood of Hagar and her son Yitzhak, triggered Sarah so deeply. Freedom for African Heritage people messed up the plan, because white people felt “lessened” in the eyes of the formerly enslaved people. And not even “lessened” as in looked down upon, but lessened from superiors to equals, which may have been worse.

As offensive as the idea of Hagar, essentially a “womb with legs,” having a viewpoint and status of her own, so too was this idea so offensive to the former enslavers in the early days of Reconstruction in our country, and we continue to see the byproducts of that offense today. And unlike Hagar, who runs away to the wilderness of Padan at the end of this parasha, and unlike the Israelites who left Mitzrayim, the land of their oppression, formerly enslaved Americans and their descendants remain in this land. And we must understand this complex relationship and history in order to be an agent of healing for our country, to assist in the teshuva and the tikkun that is overdue. When we accept an American identity, live in this land, benefit from its history, then we are also heir to its sins, regardless of who or what we are now. I am accountable to the Wampanoag on whose land I continue to live, even though my foremothers and forefathers were not a part of the violence that stole their land. But as an American, I accept that truth.

This is deeply complex both for us, and here in our Torah. Our Racial Justice Working Group is sponsoring two opportunities in particular. First is the 21 Day Challenge, “conceived several years ago by diversity expert Eddie Moore, Jr. to advance deeper understandings of the intersections of race, power, privilege, supremacy and oppression.” Thursdays in October (15, 22, 29), TBZ member professor Jerry Levine will offer a 3-part seminar called: Reconstruction in America: Racial Violence After the Civil War (1865-1876) and the Striking Connection to Our Current Situation
in the United States in 2020. Jerry wanted everyone to read this book so he lovingly and generously purchased a copy for every TBZ Member. Stop by and pick one up or we’ll mail it to you!

For today, from this reading we take something very important. I am called to the Torah as Bat Sarah Imeinu, the daughter of our spiritual mother Sarah. I love her Torah, her deeds of chesed, lovingkindness, and I can still see her as an imperfect human, capable of jealousy and influence by ego like all of us. Sometimes Torah comes to show us the flaws and humanity of our ancestors. We can't always right their wrongs, but we come to trust that teshuva is possible and that it will happen. On this day, we pray and commit ourselves to the process of teshuva, returning to the desired at-one-ment, the desired unity of our Creator and the sacred equality of all humanity. Shana Tova.